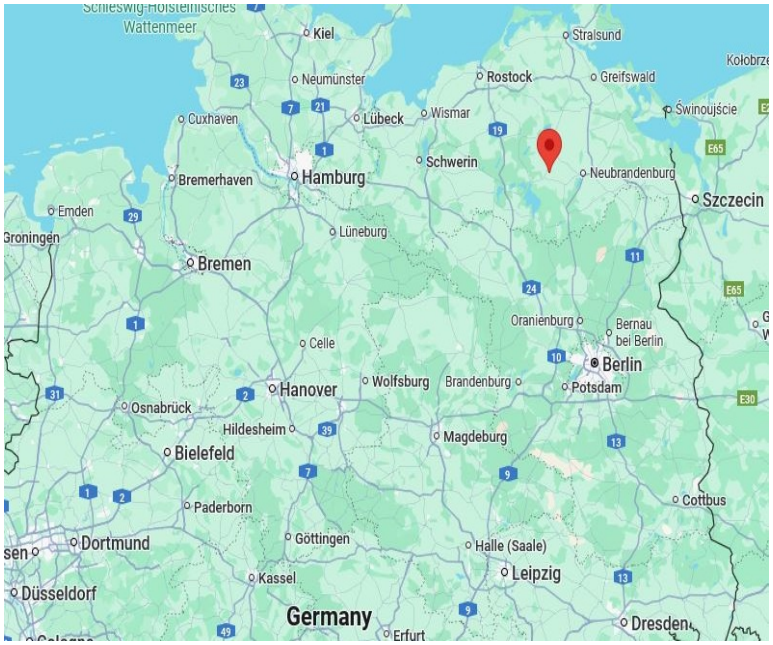
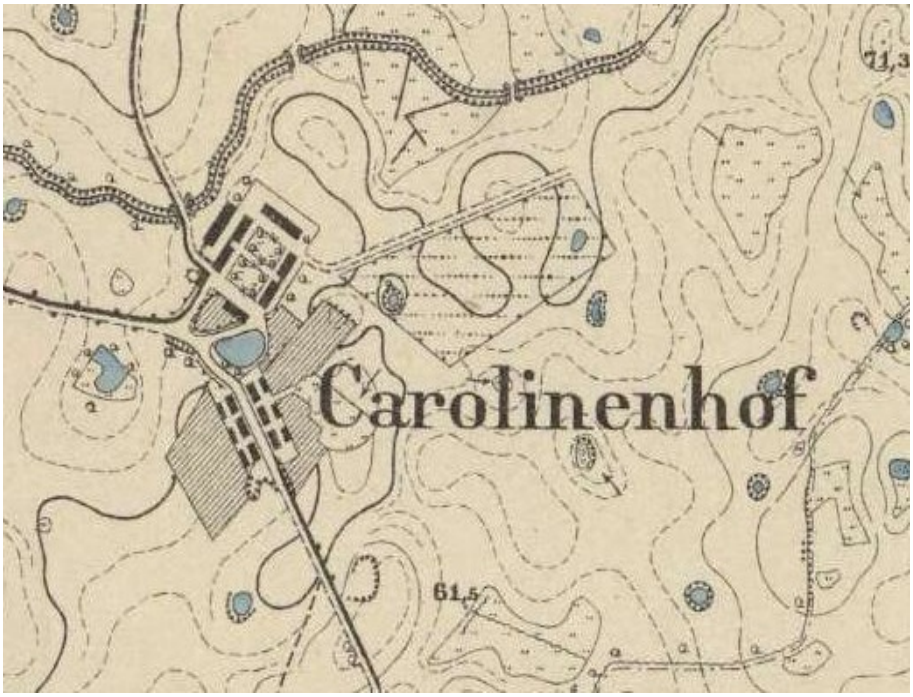
From Carolinenhof to Detroit:
How the Gielows Came to America
by a family member

In 1882, the year the Gielow family emigrated, they were living at Carolinenhof, in the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, where they were tenant farmers. Carolinenhof is in the far northeastern corner of Germany, about 80 miles north of Berlin:



It seems likely that the family's origins were in the area around Gielow, a medieval town about 10 miles northwest of Carolinenhof. You can read about Gielow here.

This 19th-century map shows Carolinenhof (which translates as "Caroline Farm") as what could be an agricultural estate: a manor house with two long outbuildings flanking a pair of gardens or courtyards. To the south are a pond or reservoir and twelve small structures adjacent to the road and fields—could these have been workers' quarters where the Gielow family lived when they were tenant farmers for the overlord of the estate? Just a guess.

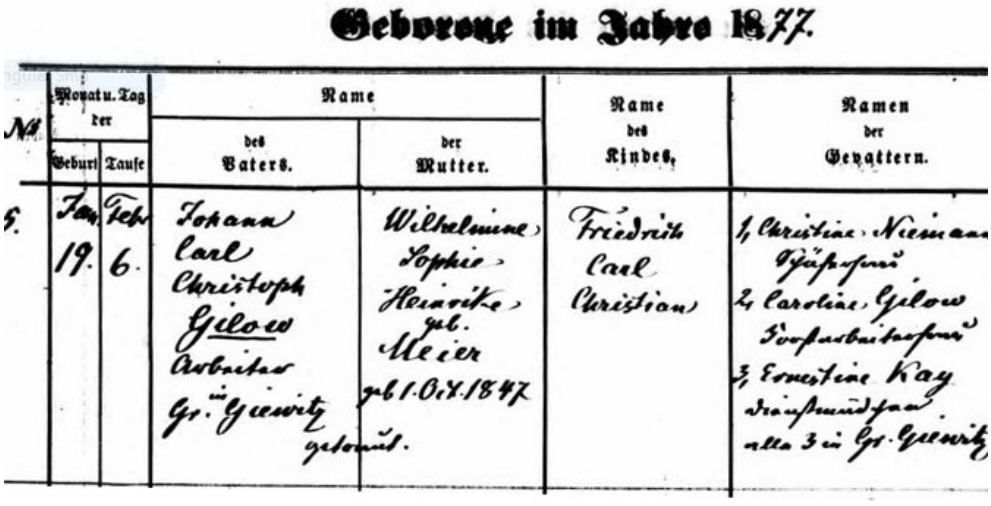


A map of the current small settlement at Carolinenhof, now consisting of a few dozen houses, shows that the manor house and pond are still there:

The manor house, built in 1847, must have been where the Gielows' overlord lived. It's now been converted into upscale vacation apartments. You can see photos of the manor house here.

Five years before the Gielows emigrated from Carolinenhof, they were living about seven miles to the west, in the small town of Gross Gievitz. When Friedrich (my grandfather) was born in January of 1877, he was baptized in the 13th-century parish church there:

This is the church's record of Friedrich's baptism on February 6, 1877:



Geborene im Jahre 1877.

Nº	Monat u. Tag der Geburt	Monat u. Tag der Taufe	Name des Vaters.	Name der Mutter.	Name des Kindes.	Namen der Gevattern.
5.	Jan. 19.	Febr. 6.	Johann Carl Christoph Gielow Arbeiter Gr. Gievitz	Wilhelmine, Sophie, Henriette, geb. Meier geb. 1. Oct. 1847	Friedrich Carl Christian	1, Christine, Niemann 2, Caroline, Gielow 3, Ernestine Kay alle 3 in Gr. Gievitz

From left to right: **Birth:** Jan. 19. **Baptism:** Feb. 6. **Name of Father:** Johann Carl Christoph

Gilow (Gielow often appears with this spelling), laborer in Gross Gievitz. ←Married→ **Name of Mother:** Wilhelmine Sophie Henriette, born Meier, born 1 Oct. 1847. **Name of Child:** Friedrich Carl Christian. **Names of Godparents:** 1. Christine Niemann, shepherd's wife. 2. Caroline Gilow, peat worker's wife. 3. Ernestine Kag, maid. All three in Gross Gievitz.

Friedrich's baptism took place here, in the small chancel of the Gross Gievitz church:

And this is the ancient, probably Romanesque, baptismal font where my three-week-old grandfather Friedrich was baptized:

According to my mother's typewritten account, the Gielows made the decision to emigrate to America because their older daughter, Caroline, would turn 15 in August of 1882. At that point she would have been required to start working in the fields, and her parents wanted a better life for her. This is very understandable. Farmwork in the 19th century was a hard life, arduous and grueling, and most of what the Gielows produced as sharecroppers went to the owners of the estate. They were allowed to keep only enough produce to feed their family, but they could sell piglets and chicks (according to my uncle Frederick's account) and/or geese (according to my mother's recollections). I also remember my mother saying that the Gielows were allowed to sell the eiderdown they collected from geese that they raised. Saving enough money from these meager sources for transatlantic passage for their family of five, plus train fare from New York to Detroit, where there was a large German community, must have loomed as a formidable task.

But how much would all of this actually have cost? The Gielows would obviously have planned to sail from Hamburg, which was the closest deep-water port, about 120 miles west of Carolinenhof (see the maps on page 1). More importantly, it was the home port of the Hamburg-Amerika Line, or Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt Actien-Gesellschaft. From 1881 to 1914, the Hamburg-Amerika Line was the largest shipping line in existence, transporting hundreds of thousands of emigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, and eastern Europe across the Atlantic. In the 1870s, around the time the Gielows would have been planning and saving for their emigration, the company placed advertisements like this one in German newspapers:

Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-
Actien-Gesellschaft.

Directe Post-Dampfschifffahrt
zwischen

Hamburg & New-York

Hâvre anlaufend, vermittels der prachtvollen deutschen Post-Dampfschiffe:

Lessing	1. März.	**Herder**	15. März.	**Gellert**	29. März.
Wieland	8. März.	**Cimbria**	22. März.	**Pommerania**	5. April.

und weiter regelmäßig *jeden Mittwoch.*

Passagepreise: Erste Cajüte Mark 500, Zweite Cajüte Mark 300,
Zwischendeck Mark 120.

Für die Welt-Ausstellung in Philadelphia werden Billets für die Hin- und Herreise ausgegeben u wird das **Dampfschiff Hammonia am 11. März dorthin expedirt.**

Nähere Auskunft wegen Fracht und Passage ertheilt der General-Bevollmächtigte

August Bolten, Wm. Miller's Nachfolger, Hamburg.

F. J. Bothof in Aschaffenburg,
Alleiniger General-Agent

sowie allein dessen Agenten: **Franz Jos. Leininger & M. J. Hesslein** und **Ludw. Otto** in **Bamberg, A. Lederer** in **Forchheim.**

The prices listed range from 500 marks for first class to 120 marks for the lowest class, *Zwischendeck*, "between deck," which we would call steerage. That bargain fare is printed in bold type and emphasized by two pointing-hand glyphs. Full fare was charged for children, so the Gielows, who would obviously travel steerage class, would have to save 600 marks to pay for transatlantic passage for their family of five. According to historical data from the

Deutsche Bundesbank, the value of 600 marks in 1882 is just over $6,000 in 2025 U.S. dollars.

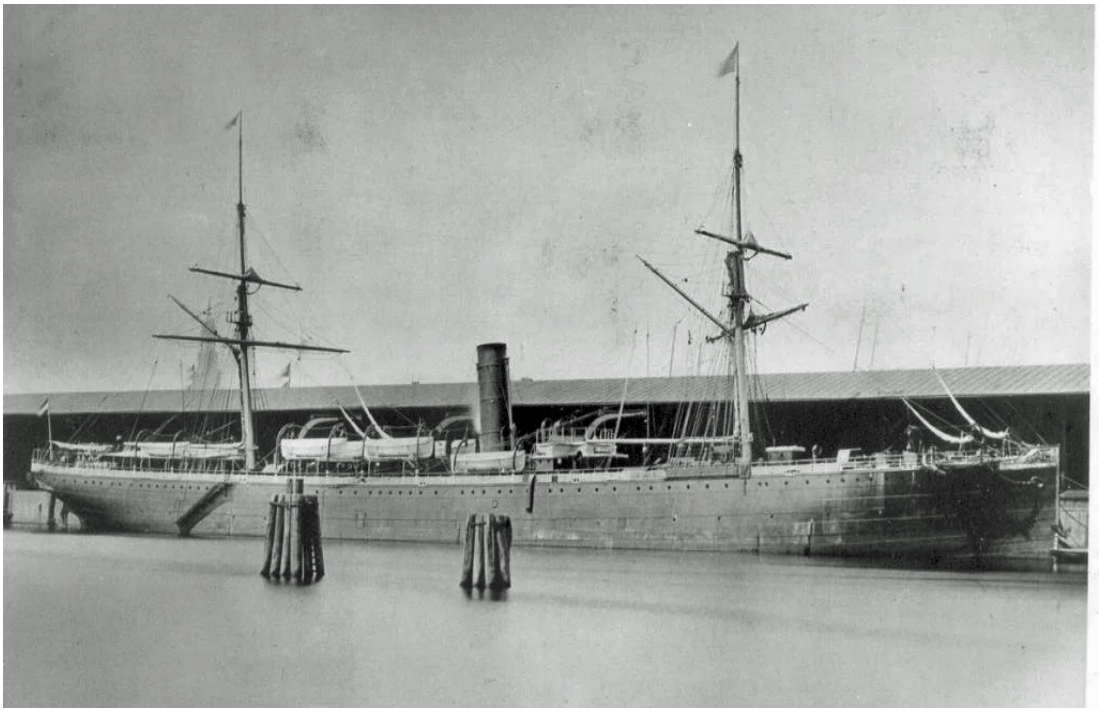
Train fares from New York to Detroit in 1882 are harder to pin down, but third-class tickets (also called “emigrant class”) seem to have ranged from about $8.00 to $10.00. So train fare from the East Coast to Michigan for the five Gielows would have totaled roughly $40 to $50, which is about $1,500 in 2025 dollars. This means that to pay for both sea and train transport, the Gielows would have to save roughly $7,500 in 2025 dollars, a substantial amount for farmers who were paid mainly in kind. But, with diligent work on their animal husbandry cottage industries, it must have seemed doable.

And, by October 1882, the Gielows had done it. They had bought their transatlantic tickets on the Hamburg-Amerika Line, packed what they could into two pieces of luggage, and set out for Hamburg with their three children: Caroline, who had recently turned 15; Friedrich, 5; and little Frieda, who was just 3. There was a good railway network in northeast Germany at that time, and Hamburg was a hub, so they likely traveled there mainly by train. The city of Hamburg operated rail links between the city’s train stations and the harbor. When the Gielows got off the train at the port, this is where they found themselves:

The photo is from 1883, the year after the Gielows passed through Hamburg. The port at that time was already an enormous, crowded global hub of trade and transport that stretched along both banks of the Elbe River. By the 1880s it was handling a massive share of Germany’s shipping, as well as serving as a gateway for goods and passengers moving between central and eastern Europe and the New World. In 1882 alone, more than 200,000 emigrants departed from Hamburg, a majority of them sailing on the Hamburg-Amerika Line.

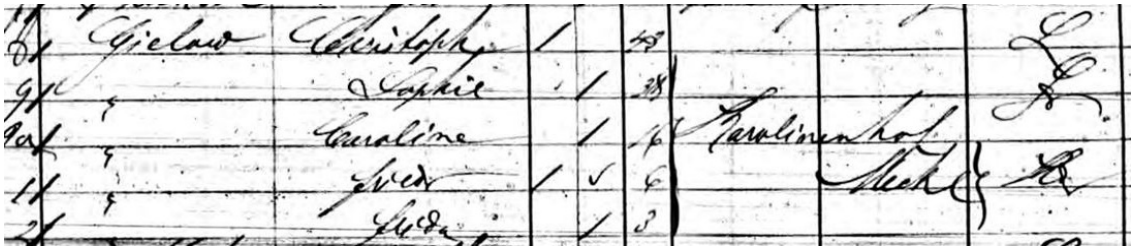
You can imagine the overwhelming impression that the sheer scale and activity of this bewildering port scene must have made on the Gielows, a farm family from rural, landlocked

Carolinenhof. But, after what must have involved some searching and inquiries, they found it: The S.S. Lessing, the ship that would take the Gielows to America:



It was a steamship with one stack and a single screw, but could also deploy sails on its two masts. It was fairly new, built in Glasgow in 1874, just eight years earlier. And it was bigger than this photo might suggest: 375 feet in length (so considerably longer than a football field) and 40 feet across at midship. It was named after Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, one of the most eminent German writers and philosophers of the 18th century.

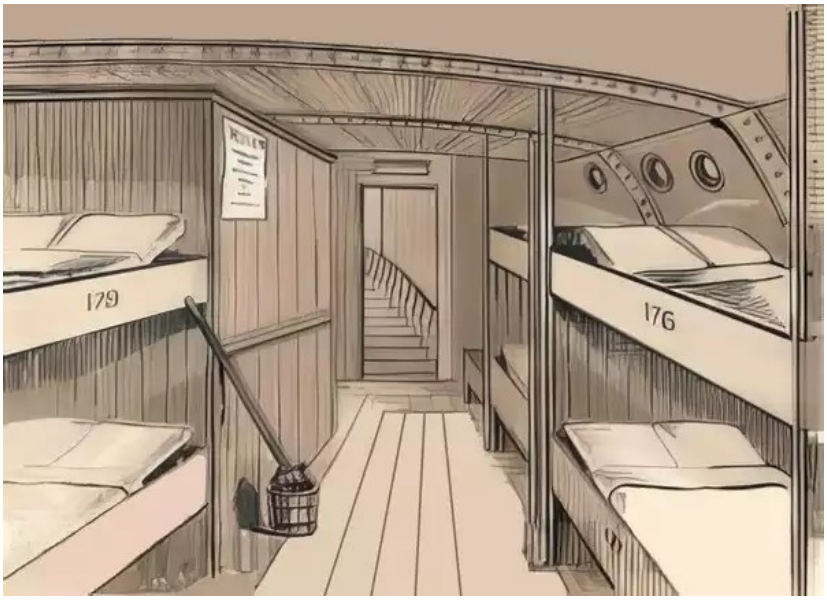
This is the passenger manifest of the S.S. Lessing for October 29, 1882—the official record of the Gielow family's emigration from Germany. The manifest lists them under the category *Zwischendeck* (steerage class):



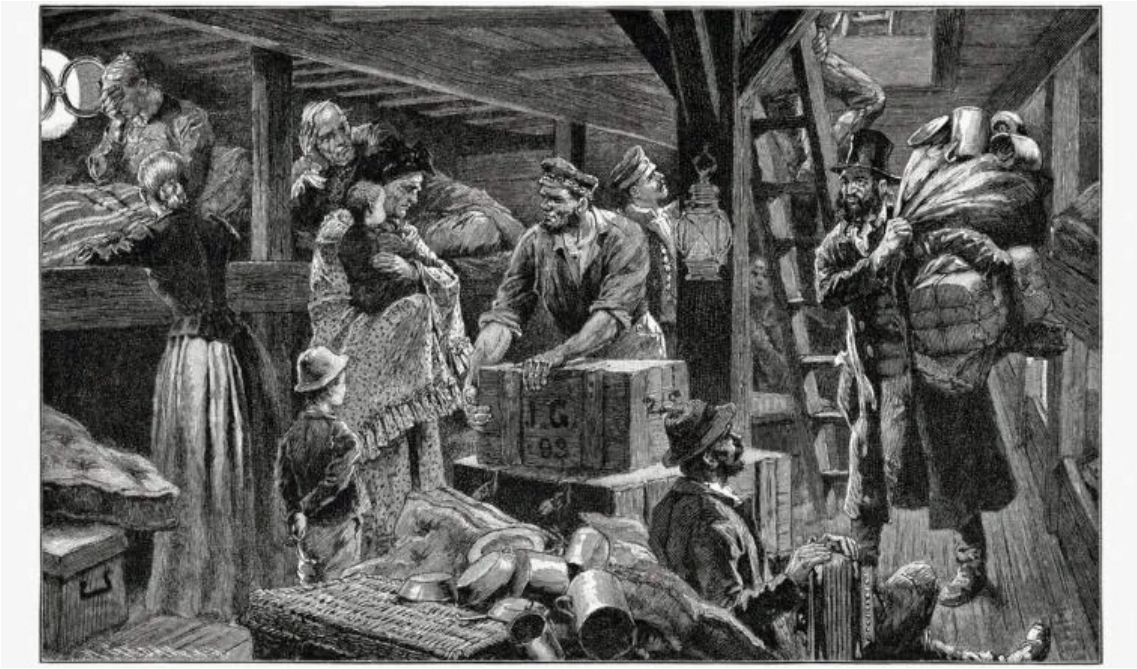
Surname	Given Name	M	F	Age	Previous Residence	Previous Occupation
Gielow	Christoph	/		43		L[andmann] = Farmer
"	Sophie		/	38		L[andmann] = Farmer
"	Caroline		/	16	Karolinenhof,	
"	Friedr[ich]	/		6	Meckl[enburg]	
"	Frieda		/	3		

A few of the ages in the ledger are slightly inaccurate: Christoph was actually 42; Sophie was 35, not 38; Caroline was 15; and Friedrich was still 5.

This sketch, which copies an old photograph, shows steerage class quarters in the S.S. Lessing:



To the Gielows, steerage probably looked more like this 1870s engraving: packed with emigrants of all sorts and ages, along with their trunks and other assorted baggage:



And it must have been very crowded: the ship's manifest records that there were 1,176 passengers on board for the October 29, 1882, sailing. My grandfather Frederick, even

though he was just 5 years old at the time, had vivid memories of the crowded steerage compartment.

This was probably the point when the most dramatic incident in the Gielow emigration story took place. (I heard this story from my mother more than 60 years ago, so the details are a little blurry.) The shipping company apparently had strict regulations about passengers who were ill. If they were found boarding a ship, they would be removed, and they would forfeit their fare. Not long before the Gielows' scheduled departure, 3-year-old Frieda developed spots on her face that looked like they could be measles. This would have disqualified her from making the trip. Of course they couldn't leave her behind in Germany, and they also couldn't risk forfeiting the tickets they had purchased with years of their hard-earned savings. So when the inspector came around, the Gielows told Frieda to be very still and quiet, then wrapped her in a blanket that covered her face. They told the inspector that she had just fallen asleep—she was so tired from their journey, and she had been crying. The inspector replied that he didn't want to disturb the little girl, then he checked the other Gielows and moved on. It was a close call. As it turned out, Frieda never got seriously ill, and she passed the health inspection in New York. But, without that successful bit of subterfuge, the Gielows might never have made it to America.

Finally, after 18 days at sea, the Gielows sailed into New York harbor on November 16, 1882. But they were not welcomed by the Statue of Liberty, which was not yet there—it would not be erected for another three years. Continuing up the Hudson River past the southern tip of Manhattan, the Lessing docked, and the Gielows took their first steps on American soil—in Hoboken, New Jersey(!). This birds-eye view of the Hoboken waterfront from 1881 shows why the Hamburg-Amerika Line had its piers there rather than across the Hudson River in Manhattan:

The company's piers in Hoboken were immediately adjacent to a number of railroad terminuses (visible at the far left), including the Erie, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western lines. For many passengers, this location made for a very easy transfer. But for

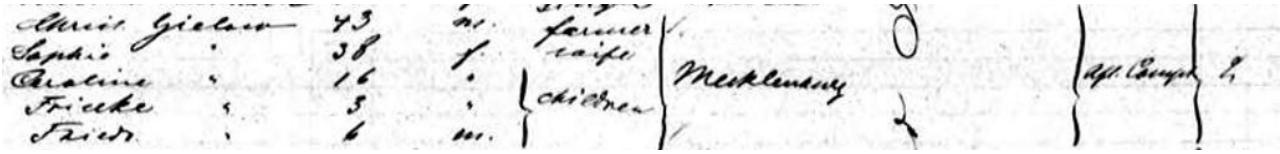
the Gielows and other immigrants, it was not as convenient: they had to board ferries that took them across the Hudson River to the immigrant processing station. But it was not on Ellis Island: the immigration facility there did not open until 1892, a decade later. Instead, the Gielows entered the U.S. through Castle Garden, in Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan:

Castle Garden, originally built as a fort, later served as a performance venue seating 6,000. ("Garden" was a 19th-century term for a public entertainment venue, one that still survives in the name Madison Square Garden.) In 1855, it was converted into America's first facility dedicated to handling immigrants entering the country. After stepping off the ferry from New Jersey, the Gielows, with children and baggage in tow, would have joined the jostling multinational crowd making its way into Castle Garden, a scene captured in this drawing made in 1880, just two years before the Gielows' arrival (notice the sidewheeler ferry in the background):

IMMIGRANTS LANDING AT CASTLE GARDEN.—Drawn by A. B. Shults.

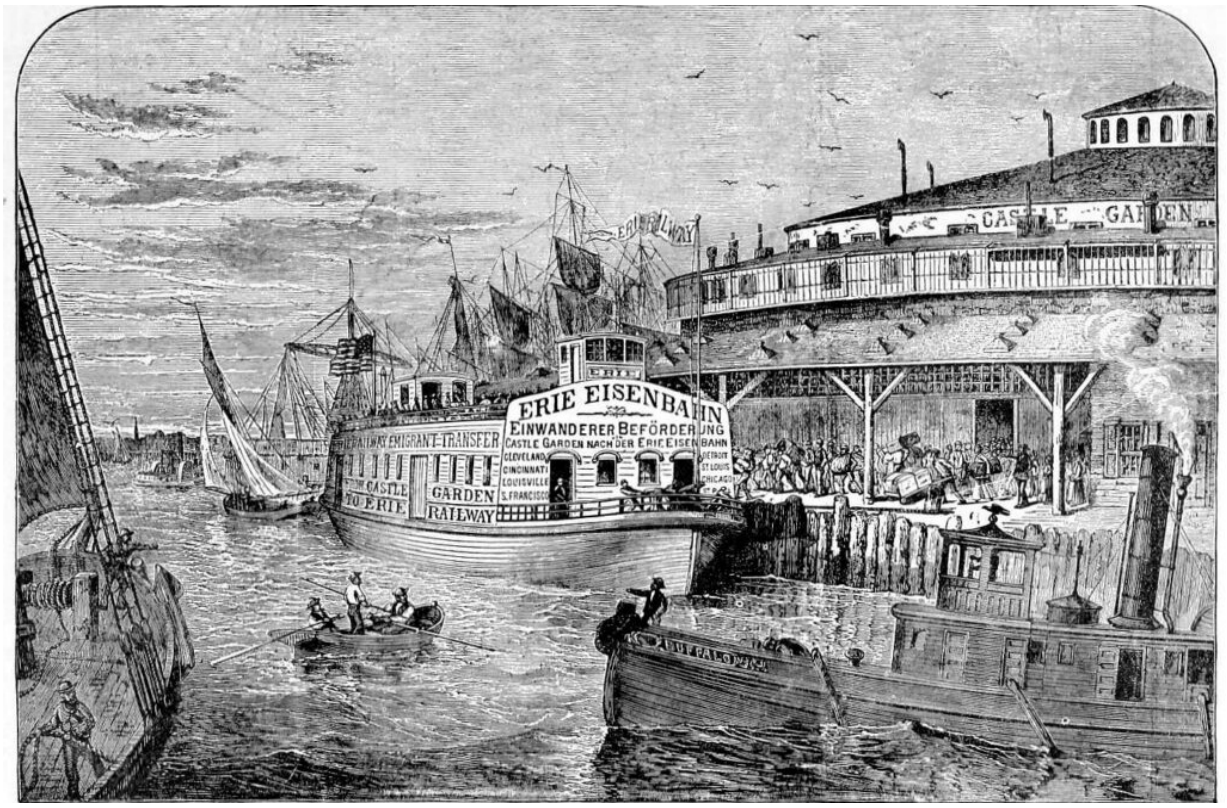
When the Gielows walked into Castle Garden, they likely found a scene that looked like this:

Up to 3,000 immigrants crowded into the vast rotunda at one time, all milling around and attempting to figure out where to go next, how to register with the authorities, where to buy railroad tickets, contact relatives, find work, exchange money, send a letter or a telegram, all of which could be done at Castle Garden. One immigrant wrote about Castle Garden, "The moment I arrived I was met by a violent roar. The immense room was packed with people representing every nationality in the world." Castle Garden's reputation for congestion and confusion even resulted in the coining of a new Yiddish word, *kesselgarten,* meaning a chaotic, noisy situation. At the registry desk for non-English speakers, a German-speaking clerk entered the Gielows' information in the ledger—the official record of their arrival in America on November 16, 1882:



Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Place of Origin	Location on Ship	Baggage
Christ. Gielow	43	m.	farmer			
Sophie "	38	f.	wife			
Caroline "	16	"		Mecklenburg	Aft Comp[artment]	2
Frieda "	3	"	children			
Friedr. "	6	m.				

Now that they were duly registered, the Gielows had to make their way to Detroit. Fortunately, three railroad companies had ticket offices at Castle Garden. A German-speaking agent at the railroad desk would have asked them where they wanted to go, calculated the mileage and price, including the costs for their baggage and the ferry ride back across the Hudson River to New Jersey, and they would have paid their fare in full. Then the Gielows joined the crowd rushing out of Castle Garden to board the waiting railroad ferry:



Notice the prominent signage in German on the ferry: "Erie Railroad – Immigrant Transfer – Castle Garden to the Erie Railroad," flanked by two lists of destinations, including Detroit.

It would have been at least a 24-hour train trip. An evening departure for Detroit from New Jersey in the 1880s would involve at least one transfer and would arrive very late the next day or early on the second morning.

It may have taken the Gielows even longer: family oral history records that the Gielows were mistakenly grouped with a large number of German immigrants headed to Milwaukee and had to be shipped back to Detroit from Chicago. And it would not have been a comfortable

trip: third-class or “emigrant” passengers were restricted to designated cars with narrow wooden benches and few amenities. In the 1880s, Robert Louis Stevenson took an emigrant train west from New Jersey, describing it as a “long, narrow wooden box, like a flat-roofed Noah’s ark, with a stove and a convenience, one at either end, a passage down the middle, and transverse benches upon either hand. Those destined for emigrants are only remarkable for their extreme plainness. . . . The benches are too short for anything but a young child.”

Finally, on November 17 or 18, 1882, the Gielows’ train snaked through the booming city of Detroit and pulled into the Michigan Central Railroad Depot on the Detroit River waterfront:

Then the Gielow family walked out through the arched doorway of the Michigan Central train station and into the streets of their new hometown—Detroit, Michigan:

The Gielows had done it. They had left behind the world of dukes and palaces and duchies, of landed nobility and overlords, of grueling labor for bare subsistence. They were in America!